

Canoe Trip Provides Therapeutic Outdoor Experience for Special Children

Editor's Note: Al Hindrichs, (Environmental Scientist Supervisor) is one of many DEQ employees who frequently go above and beyond the call of duty to volunteer their time and skills for worthy causes. Recently, Al used his professional knowledge and interests to help a group of children. Here is his first-person account.

HAVE YOU EVER ENJOYED a lazy spring day floating in a canoe down one of Louisiana's beautiful bayous? Or fished from the shore in the shade of towering oak trees? Unfortunately, many children and adults with disabilities have never had these opportunities. But things changed this past spring when over 15 children and two adults, clients at the Dr. Frank McMains Children's Developmental Center (MCDC), were given a new chance to experience nature. Last spring, personnel with the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), the LSU Cooperative Extension Service, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF), and the MCDC, along with their spouses and children, teamed up to provide an afternoon of canoeing and fishing. The outing was coordinated by Albert Hindrichs, an Environmental Scientist Supervisor with DEQ and his wife Anne, a Social Worker with the MCDC.

The MCDC located on College Drive in Baton Rouge is a United Way agency serving children with a variety of disabilities ranging from cerebral palsy to minor speech and learning disabilities. Services include customized evaluation, therapy, and counseling designed to maximize each person's ability to participate fully in all aspects of life. Cerebral palsy, a neuromuscular problem causing various degrees of impairment, often requires the use of braces, crutches, walkers, or wheelchairs, depending on the level of involvement. Because of the physical challenges for those with cerebral palsy, the canoe trip began as a way to provide new opportunities for outdoor enjoyment, while learning new skills that may have never been considered possible in the past.

However, the biggest challenge was not in the canoeing, but in funding for the trip. Each participant from the MCDC was



Taylor Raines (foreground) and Michael Campesi try their hand at fishing, while Jon Myles (red hat) and Kristen Firesheets (background) lend a hand.

responsible for his/her own canoe costs, and volunteers all agreed to pay a portion of the costs, if necessary. However, the cost of liability insurance was prohibitive. Fortunately, an anonymous donor provided the entire cost of the insurance. Further, the Baton Rouge Downtown Kiwanis Club provided an advance on their donation to the MCDC; this allowed families who may not have been able to afford the canoe rental a chance to participate. Frank Bonafay and Jim Ragland, owners of Alligator Bayou Bait Shop and Canoe Rentals,

generously provided discounted rates on the canoe rentals. Bill Branch with the LSU Cooperative Extension Service provided his own canoe, while Hunter Carmouche with DEQ brought along two canoes, just in case more were needed. The generosity of time and money shown by the volunteers and donors was simply amazing.

The big day began as volunteers from the various agencies, along with therapists and social workers from the MCDC, gathered in the parking lot of Alligator Bayou Bait Shop and Canoe Rentals. As volunteers received basic instructions for working with the participants, especially those with more profound disabilities, the participants and their parents began arriving. Volunteers and children were carefully paired according to the canoeing skills of the volunteer and the abilities of the children. In many cases, parents or caregivers accompanied the child or adult, along with a single volunteer. Thanks to the ingenuity of the MCDC physical therapists Kim LeBoeuf, Elissa

McKenzie and Tammy Roussel, those children needing extra support were comfortably accommodated in the middle of the canoes. Beanbag chairs are good for more than just watching television! After final reminders to "sit still, don't reach over the side, and keep your life vest on," everyone began taking to the water, despite the initial apprehension seen on some of the faces.

Canoes soon stretched for nearly a mile, from the launch ramp to the cypress flats along Alligator Bayou. Interspersed among the canoes were two "lifeguard boats" staffed by Environmental Scientists John DeMond and John James Clark of DEQ, both former swimming pool lifeguards who "volunteered" to help out. Janet Ketcham, Director of the MCDC, accompanied John James. Ms. Ketcham was extremely supportive of the trip and had a great time seeing the sites along the bayou, so much so that half way through the ride she was already talking about the second annual canoe trip for 2001.

While some folks were out on the water, others waiting their turn took up cane-pole, hook and worms to test the waters of Alligator Bayou for giant catfish, brim, and bass. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries supplied fully rigged cane-poles and several containers of worms for bait. Although no lunger bass were taken from the bayou, there were enough nibbles to keep the excitement going. When the adventurers returned to the landing, those wanting to go out took their places in the canoes, while those who had been out tried their hand at fishing.

As participants and volunteers slowly returned to the launch ramp, the success of the outing could be seen on the faces of all. Smiles of excitement were on the faces of the participants, and the volunteers who made it all possible. With all the support shown on the first annual Alligator Bayou Canoe Trip, the second annual trip is certain to be even better.

For more information regarding the MCDC and the Alligator Bayou Canoe Trip, please contact Al at (225) 765-0246 or e-mail al_b@deq.state.la.us.

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